



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Full Committee Hearing:

The Role of AFG and SAFER Grants in COVID-19 Response

Friday, June 12, 2020

Good afternoon and welcome to the Science, Space and Technology Committee's first virtual hearing. Today we are discussing the impact of COVID-19 on the fire service community and how we can best leverage existing federal programs to expedite assistance to fire departments during the pandemic. I appreciate our witnesses being here under these unusual circumstances but these are very important issues and we look forward to your testimony.

In 2018, medical aid calls totaled 64% of all firefighter and EMS responses. Actual fires only accounted for 4% of calls. In addition to medical emergency response, the expanded mission of the fire service includes hazardous materials response, enhanced technical rescues, and active shooter incidents. All of these missions require additional equipment, training, and staffing. COVID-19 is exacerbating what was already a chronic lack of sufficient funding for fire and EMS response given their broad mission.

During the COVID-19 public health crisis, we are relying more than ever on our nation's fire service to provide emergency medical response. For those suffering from severe cases of COVID-19 disease, firefighters are sometimes the first health care workers they interact with. Sadly, many emergency responders have arrived to find such individuals have already passed away in their own homes.

Whether they are attending to the sick or to the families of those who have just passed, firefighters are risking their own health to serve their communities. Lack of adequate PPE has led many of our firefighters to fall ill with COVID-19, and some, sadly, have died. These deaths represent a failure by policy makers to provide adequate protection to our first responders.

The Assistance to Firefighters Grant, or AFG, program was established in 2001 to provide federal assistance directly to local fire fighting and emergency response efforts. Today, this funding is needed to purchase PPE and for other equipment and training needs related to COVID-19.

In response to the crisis, Congress provided \$100 million in the CARES Act for supplemental funding to the AFG program. FEMA received more than 2,000 applications requesting a total of

\$128 million in funding. We understand those awards will be announced soon. Unfortunately, this funding only begins to address the tremendous need. The House-passed Heroes Act proposes an additional \$1 billion in supplemental funding for the AFG program and its partner program, the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response, or SAFER program.

COVID-19 has resulted in significant cuts to local and state tax revenues and other sources of support for fire departments, leaving some departments facing the hard decision to lay off firefighters in the middle of this crisis. We remain in the middle of this dual health and economic crisis at the same time that our country is confronting its long history of racial injustice. On top of that, we are in the early days of an ominous wildfire and hurricane season. This is a time of great uncertainty. Yet through it all, our communities are counting on us to ensure that our nation's first responders have the tools and support they need to do their job well and safely. I look forward to today's discussion of how Congress can help ensure these brave women and men have the resources they need.

Thank you.